The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West

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A book that has been hailed as one of the most important French contributions to philosophy in this century, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things,* first arose out of a passage in Jorge Luis Borges. As Foucault tells us in the preface, the passage was supposedly taken from a " 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia,' " in which we find a most curious way of classifying animals:

> "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera,* (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies."[1]

The strange taxonomy in this passage does not make any sense, and the method of its classification, if there is any method at all in this madness,

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1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences,* trans. pub. (New York, 1973), p. xv; hereafter abbreviated *OT.*

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is totally beyond comprehension. What else, then, can be a normal response to this chaos but an irrepressible laughter, a laughter that points out and at the same time ignores the illogicalness of the passage?

So Foucault laughed. In this laughter, however, he feels an uneasiness and even distress that the outrageous absurdity has a shattering effect, that the usual categories of thinking and naming in language are being destroyed, and that the monstrous passage threatens to "collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other," casting a spell, an "exotic charm of another system of thought," while showing "the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (*OT,* p. xv). The juxtaposition of animals in such an unthinkable order or, rather, disorder makes it impossible to find a shared space for them, not even in *utopia.* Such a strange taxonomy belongs rather to *heterotopia,* the inconceivable space that undermines the very possibility of description in language. It belongs, says Foucault, to both atopia and aphasia, the loss of correspondence between place and name. That Borges should designate China as the mythical homeland to this strange taxonomy seems most surprising, since the word *China* should immediately evoke the image of a precise region whose name alone, according to Foucault, constitutes for the West a vast reservoir of utopias:

> In our dreamworld, is not China precisely this privileged *site* of *space?* In our traditional imagery, the Chinese culture is the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered, the one most deaf to temporal events, most attached to the pure delineation of space; we think of it as a civilization of dikes and dams beneath the eternal face of the sky; we see it, spread and frozen, over the entire surface of a continent surrounded by walls. Even its writing does not reproduce the fugitive flight of the voice in horizontal lines; it erects the motionless and still-recognizeable images of things themselves in vertical columns. So much so that the Chinese encyclopaedia quoted by Borges, and the taxonomy it proposes, lead to a kind of thought without space, to words and categories that lack all life and place, but are rooted in a ceremonial space, overburdened with complex figures, with tangled paths, strange places, secret passages, and unexpected communications. There would appear to be, then, at the other extremity of the earth we inhabit, a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think. [*OT,* p. xix]

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For the West, then, China as a land in the Far East becomes traditionally the image of the ultimate Other. What Foucault does in his writing is, of course, not so much to endorse this image as to show, in the light of the Other, how knowledge is always conditioned in a certain system, and how difficult it is to get out of the confinement of the historical a priori, the *epistemes* or the fundamental codes of Western culture. And yet he takes the Borges passage seriously and remarks on its apparent incongruity with what is usually conceived about China in the Western tradition. If we are to find any modification of the traditional image of China in Foucault's thought, it is then the association of China not with an ordered space but with a space without any conceivable arrangement or coherence, a space that makes any logical ordering utterly unthinkable. Significantly, Foucault does not give so much as a hint to suggest that the hilarious passage from that "Chinese encyclopaedia" may have been made up to represent a Western fantasy of the Other, and that the illogical way of sorting out animals in that passage can be as alien to the Chinese mind as it is to the Western mind.

In fact, the monstrous unreason and its alarming subversion of Western thinking, the unfamiliar and alien space of China as the image of the Other threatening to break up ordered surfaces and logical categories, all turn out to be, in the most literal sense, a Western fiction. Nevertheless, that fiction serves a purpose in Foucault's thought, namely, the necessity of setting up a framework for his archaeology of knowledge, enabling him to differentiate the self from what is alien and pertaining to the Other and to map out the contours of Western culture recognizable as a self-contained system. Indeed, what can be a better sign of the Other than a fictionalized space of China? What can furnish the West with a better reservoir for its dreams, fantasies, and utopias?

The passage Foucault quoted appears originally in Borges' essay on John Wilkins, a seventeenth-century English scholar and Bishop of Chester, whose mind was full of "happy curiosities" including, among other things, "the possibility and the principles of a world language."[2] As Borges shows, the idea of a precise, artificial language built on a strictly logical system of numbers or symbols ultimately originates from Descartes, that is, from within the Western philosophical tradition and its desire to classify and departmentalize all phenomena of the world. Such an attempt at universal language, however, has proved to be quite futile, and all kinds of classification of the universe are inevitably arbitrary. It is precisely the "ambiguities, redundances, and deficiencies" in Wilkins' system that have reminded Borges of similar absurdities "attributed by Dr. Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent*

2. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," *Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952,* trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin, Tex., 1964), p. 101; hereafter abbreviated "AL."

Knowledge" ("AL," p. 103). In Borges' essay, however, the absurdities of the "Chinese encyclopedia" are not recalled to represent an incomprehensibly alien mode of thinking, since he mentions in the same breath "the arbitrariness of Wilkins, of the unknown (or apocryphal) Chinese encyclopedist, and of the Bibliographical Institute of Brussels," all of whom tried in vain to sort out things in the universe and exhaustively register "the words, the definitions, the etymologies, the synonymies of God's secret dictionary" ("AL," p. 104). Borges greatly admires the courageous, albeit provisional and often thwarted, human effort to penetrate the divine scheme of the universe, and the "Chinese encyclopedia" represents just part of that futile yet heroic attempt to probe God's secret. Though he mentions as his source Dr. Franz Kuhn, a German sinologist and translator of Chinese literature, and even gives the title of that "Chinese encyclopedia," the so-called *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* is nonexistent except in his own invention. As a matter of fact, it is not at all uncommon of Borges in his writings to mix erudition with imagination, blending real names and titles with imaginary ones.

In "The Congress," one of Borges' longest and most diffuse tales, the reader catches another glimpse of the Chinese encyclopedia. This time those fictitious volumes are put among the Britannica, the Larousse, the Brockhaus, and the other "real" encyclopedias in the Congress' reference library. "I recall," says the narrator of the story, "how I reverently fondled the silky volumes of a certain Chinese encyclopedia whose finely brushed characters seemed to me more mysterious than the spots on a leopard's skin."[3] Like the essay on Wilkins, "The Congress" depicts the ambitious intellectual effort to organize everything under the sun and to create order out of chaos. It also dramatizes the failure of this effort by portraying the burning of all the books collected by members of the Congress, including that Chinese encyclopedia. As a matter of fact, the encyclopedia is one of the recurrent images in Borges with a strong suggestion of intellectual power to create its own systematic and ideal world in language amidst the labyrinth of universe. Artificial language systems arise from the desire to impose order on the chaotic universe, and encyclopedias represent the paramount form of such orderly marshalling of things. In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," one of Borges' best fantastic stories, Uqbar, the strange land of ideal objects, exists nowhere except in the pages of an encyclopedia, quite specifically in Volume XLVI of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia,*" which is, according to the narrator, "a literal but delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1902." Yet the article on Uqbar is not to be found there, for it exists only in the copy Bioy Casares acquired "at some sale or other," which miraculously

3. Borges, "The Congress," *The Book of Sand,* trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York, 1977), p. 37.

has four extra pages containing that article.[4] In other words, that encyclopedia exists only in Borges' fictional world to which he has, however, lent some credibility in a playful fashion by mentioning the real *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Bioy Casares, the name of a real person. In another story, "The Garden of Forking Paths," Dr. Yu Tsun, a Chinese professor who works as a spy for the Germans, finds in the library of an English sinologist "bound in yellow silk several volumes of the Lost Encyclopedia, edited by the Third Emperor of the Luminous Dynasty but never printed."[5] As in Borges' other stories, the encyclopedia here also symbolizes a tremendous but ultimately futile effort to arrange all the irregularities of the universe; its being lost in an obscure little foreign town where a murder is about to occur intensifies the irony of its supposed function as a means to order.

Borges sees the universe as a labyrinth with its innumerable passages, corridors, tortuous paths, and blind alleys, a labyrinth not without its own mysterious order, but an order unintelligible to human beings. Thus the futile attempt at classification in the Chinese encyclopedia, like Wilkins' artificial language, symbolizes the absurd human condition in which the mind, hindered by the limitation of knowledge and the inadequacy of language, tries hopelessly to cope with the vast and labyrinthine creation. On the other hand, literary creation for Borges is also the making of a labyrinth. By connecting the name of a real sinologist with an invented title, Borges creates a maze that tends to puzzle and mislead his readers. Many critics have noticed Borges' "esoteric erudition," which, besides being genuine erudition, is often esoteric only because he playfully mixes his readings with inventions and blurs the boundaries between the true and the imagined as well as the generic boundaries between essay and story. Borges not only plays jokes with readers who enjoy his fantastic style but plays tricks on critics who try to track down his often obscure references. Thus, we may certainly attribute the Chinese encyclopedia to Borges the mythmaker and writer of fantastic tales, and realize that the incomprehensible passage Foucault quoted is nothing more than a good-natured joke, a fictitious representation of fictitious writing itself.

We have no reason, however, to suspect that Borges invents the Chinese encyclopedia to represent an exotic and alien culture, because in his dictionary the word *Chinese* is not synonymous with Other. Indeed, in his poem "The Keeper of the Books," as Borges recalls, he even assumes an imaginary Chinese identity: "I was trying to be as Chinese as a good student of Arthur Waley should be."[6] In his effort to transcend

4. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," trans. James E. Irby, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and Irby (New York, 1983), pp. 3, 4.

5. Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," trans. Yates, *Labyrinths*, p. 24.

6. Borges, *Borges on Writing*, ed. di Giovanni, Daniel Halpern, and Frank MacShane (New York, 1973), p. 86.

the limitations of space and time, and to grasp the essence of different cultures and histories, he always privileges the common nature of all human beings rather than their difference. "We love over-emphasizing our little differences, our hatreds," says Borges, "and that is wrong. If humanity is to be saved, we must focus on our affinities, the points of contact with all other human beings; by all means we must avoid accentuating our differences."[7] Borges is particularly sensitive to the problematic of the Other, and the theme of double identities runs throughout his works. In these works, the Other often turns out to be no other than the Self.[8]

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Indeed, we do not have to go very far to seek for the Other. The need to ascertain what makes up our own being, to define our very identity and the features of the world in which we live, that is, the need to have any knowledge of ourselves and our culture, has always to be gratified by an act of differentiation. Spinoza thus formulates one of his propositions: "Every individual thing, or everything which is finite and has a conditioned existence, cannot exist or be conditioned to act, unless it be conditioned for existence and action by a cause other than itself."[9] This is, of course, one of the elementary principles of logic that postulates that the Self is invariably correlated with the Other, and that nothing can be determined by and in itself except by being differentiated from what it is not, or as Spinoza puts it, "determination is negation."[10] Since Ferdinand de Saussure, we are familiar with the structural principle of binary opposition in thinking and in language, the idea that language is a system of terms that define one another in mutual difference. When we have one thing among many and can tell the one from the others at all, what we can tell is nothing but their difference. This point is made clearly in the *Parmenides*, that otherwise enigmatic Platonic dialogue: "if we are talking about the others, things that are others must be different; 'other' and 'different' are two names for the same things."[11]

Philosophical discussions of the Other evidently bear on the problems we have to face when we try to understand different cultures, especially

7. Borges, "Facing the Year 1983," *Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges, Including a Selection of Poems*, trans. Nicomedes Suárez Araúz et al. (Housatonic, Mass., 1984), p. 12.

8. See, for example, "The Other" in *The Book of Sand*, pp. 11–20, and "Borges and I" in *Labyrinths*, pp. 246–47.

9. Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics, The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, 2 vols. (New York, 1951), 2:67.

10. Spinoza, *Correspondence, The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 2:370.

11. Plato, *Parmenides*, trans. F. M. Cornford, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J., 1961), p. 954.

cultures so drastically different as the East and the West. Rudyard Kipling once said, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."[12] Logically, however, the fact that the poet knows East and West as two separate entities already indicates that not only have the twain met, but each has recognized the Otherness of the other. The East or the Orient, which stands for the Other over against which the West has been able to identify itself, is indeed a conceptual given in the process of self-understanding of the West, and an image built up in that formative process as much as the West itself. Thus the philosophical notion of the Other in Plato and Spinoza takes on the quality of a cultural construct in the West when it comes to represent whatever is conceived as different from traditional Western values. As a cultural entity conceived in the West, the Orient, as Edward Said argues, is almost a European invention:

> We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.[13]

Though by Orient Said means the Middle East, what he says may be applied to the Far East as well, especially to China as the paradigm and locale of the Other with its own history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary. Vico's famous principle of *verum factum* is of special import for Said. It defines the criterion of truth in terms of the convertibility of the true and the made, thus elevating the humanities to a higher level than the natural sciences on the grounds that the secret of nature is known only to God the Creator. However, Vico says, "the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and . . . its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind."[14] In the Greek sense of the word, men are poets, that is, makers who have not only created the world they inhabit and myths that account for their experience of the world, but they have "created themselves" (*NS*, p. 112). According to Vico, nothing can be known unless it is experienced; and nothing makes sense unless it is accommodated to the shape of the human mind, which imposes its own shape on the world and our experience of it. Studies of the modifications of the human mind from prelogical thinking in concrete images to logical conceptualization

12. Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West," *Collected Verse of Rudyard Kipling* (New York, 1907), p. 136.

13. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), pp. 4–5.

14. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, ed. and trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), p. 96; hereafter abbreviated *NS*.

constitute the bulk of Vico's theory of knowledge, which fully recognizes the epistemological value of myth and mythic thinking in primitive societies while refusing to accept Cartesian rationalism as the sole criterion universally applicable to all times and cultures.

This seems to open a new historical vision to which Erich Auerbach enthusiastically attributes the widening of the aesthetic horizon in the West since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Owing to Vico, Auerbach declares with perfect assurance, we are now able to acknowledge the independent values of early and foreign civilizations and to cultivate the true catholicity of aesthetic taste and judgment. Under the impact of Vico's *New Science,* which for Auerbach is nothing less than a great " 'Copernican discovery' " in historical studies,

> no one would condemn a Gothic cathedral or a Chinese temple as ugly because they are not in conformity with classical models of beauty or consider the *Chanson de Roland* as a barbaric and ugly monster, unworthy of being compared to the civilized perfection accomplished in Voltaire's *Henriade.* Our historic way of feeling and judging is so deeply rooted in us that we have ceased to be aware of it. We enjoy the art, the poetry and the music of many different peoples and periods with equal preparedness for understanding.[15]

Vis-à-vis Foucault's remark on the Other, it is no wonder that Auerbach should have singled out a Chinese temple to represent an alien concept of beauty. In the eighteenth century, however, those who grew tired of the vogue of chinoiserie often mentioned the Gothic and the Chinese in tandem as equally grotesque and extravagant, as these satirical lines from Robert Lloyd's *Cit's Country Box* (1757) clearly show:

> Now bricklay'rs, carpenters and joiners,
> With Chinese artists and designers,
> Produce their schemes of alteration,
> To work this wondrous reformation.
> The trav'ler with amazement sees
> A temple, Gothic or Chinese,
> With many a bell, and tawdry rag on,
> And crested with a sprawling dragon.[16]

Since China has been for so long a myth and symbol of difference, the appreciation of the elegance of a Chinese temple would indeed be a real

15. Erich Auerbach, "Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism," in *Studia Philologica et Litteraria in Honorem L. Spitzer,* ed. A. G. Hatcher and K. L. Selig (Bern, 1958), p. 33.

16. Robert Lloyd, quoted in Qian Zhongshu [Ch'ien Chung-shu], "China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century (I)," *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* 2 (June 1941): 31.

proof of the true spirit of cosmopolitanism, an undeniable testimony to the triumph of aesthetic historicism.

The surmounting of dogmatic precepts and provincialism, the cultivation of historical sympathy with a genuine interest in the totality of human experience of creation, and the preparedness to accept and enjoy the artistic achievements of ancient and foreign cultures may all be logical outgrowths of Vico's theory, but the recognition of the aesthetic values of Chinese architecture and Chinese art in general owes more to Auerbach's view than to Vico's. For in the *New Science,* Vico characterizes China and the Chinese in an unmistakably traditional scenario, in which China appears to be a site of space stubbornly inaccessible to the revolution of time. The Chinese, Vico observes, "are found writing in hieroglyphs just as the ancient Egyptians did"; they "boast a monstrous antiquity because in the darkness of their isolation, having no dealings with other nations, they had no true idea of time" (*NS,* pp. 32, 45). The Confucian philosophy, like "the priestly books of the Egyptians," is "rude and clumsy," almost entirely devoted to "a vulgar morality" (*NS,* p. 33). Chinese painting seems to Vico "most crude," for the Chinese "do not yet know how to make shadows in painting, against which highlights can stand out." Even Chinese porcelain fails to impress him, as he thinks the Chinese "just as unskilled as the Egyptians were in casting" (*NS,* p. 51). The comparison between the Chinese and the Egyptians Vico constantly emphasizes indicates how they both represent, as traditionally understood in the West, totally alien civilizations that are oblivious to any progress in history and lifelessly frozen in their vast, timeless immobility. The irony, however, is that this traditional image of China has itself proved to be quite frozen and timeless, as we find it almost intact in the writings of Foucault and some other contemporary thinkers who, notwithstanding the better knowledge now made available to Western scholars by the progess in sinology, still think of China in very much the same terms as Vico did some two hundred years ago: "as a civilization of dikes and dams beneath the eternal face of the sky; . . . a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think" (*OT,* p. xix).

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Vico's view, however, does not represent the whole picture of China in the Western mind of his time. The eighteenth century, as Adolf Reichwein argues, saw the first "metaphysical contact" between China and Europe, and the Western view was then largely favorable. Reichwein maintains that the age of the Rococo was imbued with a spirit akin to that of Chinese culture, a spirit manifested in those graceful products imported from China: "Sublimated in the delicate tints of fragile porcelain,

in the vaporous hues of shimmering Chinese silks, there revealed itself to the minds of that gracious eighteenth-century society in Europe a vision of happy living such as their own optimism had already dreamed of."[17] Indeed, in Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock,* that famous mock-heroic drawing-room drama, one can see how important porcelain becomes as a symbol of the feminine component of the Rococo, the daintiness of eighteenth-century high society: for the cutting of the curl from fair Belinda, which forms the fatal climax and the central action of the poem, is always foreboded by the breaking of a "frail China jar" or some porcelain vessels.[18] Indeed, porcelain, silk, lacquer, wallpaper, Chinese gardening, and *ombres chinoises* all became fuels that fed the craze in Europe for things Chinese, the curious eighteenth-century vogue of chinoiserie.

Largely based on favorable reports from Jesuit missionaries and their translation of some of the Chinese classics, on the influential pioneer works by Juan González de Mendoza, Louis Daniel Le Comte, and especially Jean Baptiste Du Halde's *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise,* many eighteenth-century philosophers found in China and the Chinese the model of a nation well organized on the basis of lofty reason and good conduct. After Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes,* dozens of imitations commented on contemporary European life through the mouthpiece of a foreigner, including some collections of "Chinese letters." An example of this particular genre in English is Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World,* which fully exploits the opportunity for satire on the unsatisfactory conditions in contemporary England. In France, Michel de Montaigne already spoke about China in the sixteenth century as a great nation, whose history made him realize "how much wider and more various the world is than either the ancients or ourselves have discovered."[19] Donald Lach is quite right in pointing out that Montaigne "uses the East to support his beliefs about the uncertainty of knowledge, the infinite variety in the world, and the universality of moral precepts"; and that he saw in China "an example for Europe that he never discerned elsewhere in the overseas world."[20] In Montaigne as well as in Goldsmith, the use of China serves a purpose that is obviously not concerned with China per se but with learning about the self in the West.

In the eighteenth century, chinoiserie became more than just a vogue in daily social life. For Voltaire, China was "*le plus sage empire de l'univers.*"[21]

17. Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century,* trans. J. C. Powell (New York, 1925), pp. 25–26; hereafter abbreviated *CE.*

18. See Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock, Selected Poetry and Prose,* 2d ed., ed. William K. Wimsatt (New York, 1972), pp. 99, 105, 110.

19. Michel de Montaigne, "On Experience," *Essays,* trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 352.

20. Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe,* 2 vols. (Chicago, 1965–77), 2:297.

21. François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII,* ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols. (Paris, 1963), 1:224, hereafter abbreviated *E.* All translations of Voltaire are mine.

He admitted that the Chinese, like the French two hundred years earlier or the ancient Greeks or Romans, were not good mechanics or physicists, "but they have perfected morality, which is the first of the sciences" (*E,* 1:68). He greatly admired Confucius for counselling virtue, preaching no mysteries, and teaching in "pure maxims in which you find nothing trivial and no ridiculous allegory [*rien de bas, et rien d'une allégorie ridicule*]" (*E,* 1:70). Philosophers of the Enlightenment came to know Confucius at a time when they were extremely critical of all existing European institutions, trying to differentiate Christian morality from dogmas of the Church. They suddenly discovered, to their astonishment, that in great antiquity in China—a country whose material products had won the admiration of the average people in the market—Confucius had taught the philosophy of a state built on the basis of ethical and political *bon sens,* and that the Chinese civilization had developed for centuries on principles different from, yet in many respects superior to, those of the West. "Thus," says Reichwein, "Confucius became the patron saint of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Only through him could it find a connecting link with China" (*CE,* p. 77).

Reichwein declares that in the year 1760, with Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs,* Europe's admiration of China reached its zenith. However, in a substantial study of China in English literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Qian Zhongshu shows that Reichwein's book has unduly left out English literature and that the situation was quite different in England, where sinophilism was at its height in the seventeenth century, but suffered an eclipse in the eighteenth, particularly as seen in its literature.[22] Qian's study provides many examples of how fact and fiction about China were commingled in the minds of the English, as China was yet more legendary than real, and English men of letters could still reflect on China in a leisurely manner, with an interest more humanistic than pragmatic. For all the false information they may have had and all the strange ideas and popular misconceptions they may have helped to propagate, those writers are extremely interesting precisely because they spoke of China as the Other, as a country whose unfamiliar outline could be filled in with all sorts of fantasies, philosophical speculations, and utopian idealizations.

Of great interest is their discussion of language and writing in China. Probably based on Mendoza, Francis Bacon remarks that the Chinese "write in characters real, which express neither letters nor words in gross,

22. See Qian Zhongshu [Ch'ien Chung-shu], "China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth Century," *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* 1 (Dec. 1940): 351–84. See also Qian, "China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century (I)," pp. 7–48, and "China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century (II)," *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* 2 (Dec. 1941): 113–52. I am deeply indebted to Mr. Qian for discussion of this subject.

but things or notions."[23] Here Bacon is talking about language as the "organ of tradition," defining, after Aristotle, words as " 'images of cogitations' " and letters as " 'images of words.' " But words, Bacon continues, are not the only medium capable of expressing cogitations, for "we see in the commerce of barbarous people, that understand not one another's language, and in the practice of divers that are dumb and deaf, that men's minds are expressed in gestures, though not exactly, yet to serve the turn."[24] It is in this context that he mentions how the Chinese use characters to communicate among themselves without understanding one another's spoken language. If that is a sign of the "barbarous," if Chinese characters express neither words nor letters—namely, images of cogitations and their transmission in alphabetic writing—the obvious inference must be that Chinese is a primitive language. And that, as we shall see, is precisely the point some writers of that age tried to prove in their vigorous quest for the "primitive language"—"primitive" in the sense of belonging to the times of the beginning or origin: the first language God created and the antediluvian people used, a language pure and simple, yet unaffected by the confusion of tongues at Babel.

Many Jesuits had propagated the view that the Chinese were descendants of Noah and had received from him the principles of natural religion, which had prepared them well for accepting the revealing light of Christianity. Under the influence of such a truly mythical view, Walter Ralegh asserts in his *History of the World* (1614) that Noah's ark finally landed in the East, somewhere between India and China; and Thomas Browne declares that "the Chineses who live at the borders of the earth . . . may probably give an account of a very ancient languadge" because by using common written characters the Chinese are yet able, in spite of their confusion in spoken language, to "make use of the workes of their magnified Confutius many hundred yeares before Christ, and in an historicall series ascend as high as Poncuus, who is conceaved to bee Noah."[25] However, it is John Webb who has presented, in a small octavo volume, the most intriguing argument on the Chinese language, and probably the first extensive treatment of this subject in the West. The thesis of his book is clearly stated in its title: *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability That the Language Of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language.* In his dedicatory epistle to Charles II, dated 29 May 1668, Webb professes to "advance the DISCOVERY of that GOLDEN-MINE of Learning, which from all ANTIQUITY hath lain concealed in the

23. Francis Bacon, *Of the Proficience and Advancement of Learning, Human and Divine, The Works of Francis Bacon,* 10 vols. (London, 1824), 1:147.

24. Ibid., 1:146.

25. Thomas Browne, "Of Languages, and Particularly of the Saxon Tongue," *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne,* ed. Norman Endicott (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), p. 427.

PRIMITIVE TONGUE."[26] He explains that his intention is "not to dispute what in Possibility cannot, but what in Probability may be the First Speech" (*HE,* [p. iii]). Given the authority of the Bible and the "credible History" in the seventeenth century, Webb's argument must have impressed his contemporaries as logically simple and forceful. With his syllogistic argument firmly grounded on Scripture and history, Webb says:

> Scripture teacheth, that the whole Earth was of one Language until the Conspiracy at BABEL; History informs that CHINA was peopled, whilst the Earth was so of one Language, and before that Conspiracy. Scripture teacheth that the Judgment of Confusion of Tongues, fell upon those only that were at BABEL; History informs, that the CHINOIS being fully setled before, were not there; And moreover that the same LANGUAGE and CHARACTERS which long preceding that Confusion they used, are in use with them at this very DAY; whether the Hebrew, or Greek Chronology be consulted. [*HE,* (pp. iii–iv)]

Webb did not know Chinese himself, but drawing on all the important works then available, he was able to argue with assurance that "*China* was after the Flood first planted either by *Noah* himself, or some of the sons of *Sem,* before they remove to *Shinaar,*" and that "it may with much probability be asserted, *That the Language of the Empire of CHINA, is, the PRIMITIVE Tongue, which was common to the whole World before the Flood*" (*HE,* pp. 31–32, 44). In no small feat to trace the changes of sound and spelling, he even proved to his own satisfaction that the Chinese emperor Yaus or Jaus (obviously the legendary Yao) was the same as Janus, whom many distinguished authors had identified as Noah himself! Finally he proposes "six principal guides" for discovering the primitive language: antiquity, simplicity, generality, modesty of expression, utility, and brevity, to which may be added consent of authors.[27] As he finds in Chinese plenty of these features, he has no doubt that Chinese is the primitive or first language.

Webb's enthusiasm for Chinese civilization is obvious; so are the Western values that underlie his appreciation of China. For him, as for many others in the seventeenth century who sought to see an ideal country where their dreamed values became true, China was that dreamland. He finds no difficulty in seeing China as realizing both Christian and Platonic ideals, for the Chinese are "*de civitate Dei,* of the City of God," and "their Kings may be said to be Philosophers, and their Philosophers, Kings" (*HE,* pp. 32, 93). Chinese poets win his acclaim for not stuffing their works with "Fables, Fictions, and Allegorical conceits,

26. John Webb, *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability That the Language Of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language* (London, 1669), [p. ii]; hereafter abbreviated *HE.*
27. See *HE,* pp. 191–212.

such as when the Authors Poetical rapture is over, himself understands not" (*HE*, p. 98). He observes that in Chinese poetry there are "*Heroick* verse[s]" for didactic purposes, poems of nature, and also poems "which treat of Love, not with so much levity nevertheless, as ours, but in such chaste Language, as not an undecent and offensive word to the most chaste ear is to be found in them." And most amusingly, he informs his readers that the Chinese "have no Letters whereby to express the *Privy parts*, nor are they to be found written in any part of all their Books." This remarkable phenomenon, he claims, is due to "the detestation of that shame, which *Noah* received by the discovery of his nakedness" (*HE*, pp. 98, 99).

For Webb as for Voltaire a century later, the perfection of morality in China, the outcome of a pure and uncorrupted state of natural religion, deserves the greatest admiration. Webb's book, as Qian comments, represents the best knowledge then available about China; it is full of inspiration and insight, putting its emphasis on "the cultural aspect of China instead of being interested in a *mélange adultère de chinoiseries*."[28] It is therefore no exaggeration to say that in England, as the works of Webb and some other writers can testify, the enthusiasm for China and Chinese culture reached its zenith in the seventeenth century.

4

After a period of infatuation, there is bound to be disenchantment and a change of heart. And indeed we find a quite different picture of China in eighteenth-century English literature. This, of course, corresponds with the social changes in England of the time on a much larger scale. The seventeenth-century idealization of China can be partly traced to religious interests that prompted the Jesuit missionaries to go to China and study its culture. Such evangelistic zeal, however, seems less characteristic of the so-called Age of Reason: in English literature, the fictional character who goes to China is significantly not a missionary but a practical-minded fellow like Robinson Crusoe. In the second part of Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe gives running comments as he travels through Chinese cities; his extremely negative impressions amount to a total rejection of the more favorable view we find in the literature of an earlier period. This famous earthy traveler constantly compares the "reality" he sees in China with that of Europe, predictably always to the disadvantage of the Asian country, striking a note of colonial militarism that is so typical of the time of the British Empire:

28. Qian, "China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth Century," p. 371.

> . . . what are their buildings to the palaces and royal buildings of Europe? What is their trade to the universal commerce of England, Holland, France, and Spain? What are their cities to ours for wealth, strength, gaiety of apparel, rich furniture, and an infinite variety? What are their ports, supplied with a few junks and barks, to our navigation, our merchant fleets, our large and powerful navies? Our city of London has more trade than all their mighty empire. One English, or Dutch, or French man-of-war of eighty guns would fight and destroy all the shipping of China.[29]

If Webb saw the Chinese as being "of the City of God," Crusoe, on the contrary, finds them "a barbarous nation of pagans, little better than savages." He cannot understand why the English "say such fine things of the power, riches, glory, magnificence, and trade of the Chinese, because I saw and knew that they were a contemptible herd or crowd of ignorant, sordid slaves, subjected to a government qualified only to rule such a people."[30] If the Chinese enjoy a reputation for wisdom, says Crusoe, they are wise only "among the foolish ones"; their religion, being "all summed up in Confucius's maxims," is "really not so much as a refined paganism"; and their government is nothing but "absolute tyranny."[31]

Such a pungently critical view indeed contrasts sharply with the seventeenth-century enthusiasm for China, but Defoe's is not the only voice of depreciation. Dr. Johnson, for example, despite his "particular enthusiasm with respect to visiting the wall of China," calls the Chinese "barbarians," for he sees it as a sign of "rudeness" that "they have not an alphabet. They have not been able to form what all other nations have formed."[32] The word "rudeness" with which Johnson justifies his view reminds us of Vico, but in this case, as in many others in his conversation, the Doctor may be arguing for the sake of argument, behind which he would rather stand firm simply because Boswell is proposing a different view. Yet there is another example in his introductory note to Sir William Chambers' *Chinese Architecture,* a book with which he was much pleased. In that introduction, Johnson declares that he does not want "to be numbered among the exaggerators of Chinese excellence." He believes, in fact with very good reasons, that much of that exaggeration is due to "novelty"; and he tries to counterbalance the "boundless panegyricks which have been lavished upon the Chinese learning, policy, and arts."[33] Evidently, when French philosophers were paying very high

29. Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, The Works of Daniel Defoe,* 8 vols., 16 pts. (Boston, 1903–4), 1:2:256–57.

30. Ibid., 1:2:257, 258.

31. Defoe, *Serious Reflections during The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe With his vision of The Angelic World, The Works of Daniel Defoe,* 2:3:123, 127.

32. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson,* ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1980), pp. 929, 984–85.

33. Ibid., p. 1211 n.2.

tribute to Confucius and the Chinese civilization, their English contemporaries were having many serious doubts and reservations.

To be sure, the picture Reichwein paints of China in the perception of eighteenth-century Europe is not all that rosy. He mentions the reaction against Voltaire's excessive praise: the marked indifference of Frederick the Great; the profound skepticism, disparagement, and critique as expressed by Rousseau, Montesquieu, Frédéric-Melchior Grimm, François de Fénelon, and many others; but Reichwein dismisses all these detractors of China as "hemmed in by the limitations of an arbitrary system" (*CE,* p. 94) and presents Goethe's enthusiastic remarks on the Chinese as a kind of grand finale to his book. He regards the *Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten* as a work indicating Goethe's warm reception of the Chinese world during the last years of his life. "Everything belonging to that world," says Reichwein, "seemed to him light, delicate, almost ethereal, the relations of things cleanly and clearly defined, the inner and the outer life serene and free from convulsions, something like battledore and shuttlecock perfectly played, without a single clumsy movement" (*CE,* p. 145). But after Goethe, the concept of China underwent a radical change in nineteenth-century Europe as the influence of the Jesuits began to wane and a more practical commercial view gained the upper hand. As a result, China lost its spiritual significance for the West, and "the idea of China as, above all, a first-rate world-market is beginning to be the sole concern of public opinion" (*CE,* p. 150).[34] Many misconceptions were cultivated by philosophers and historians, particularly the one that China was in a state of eternal immobility and standstill, an idea elaborately developed and explained in the works of Hegel, Leopold von Ranke, and others—an idea that has become an integral part of the traditional image of China in Western eyes.

In America, whose cultural roots are firmly planted across the ocean in Europe, we find the change of attitudes and concepts often following patterns similar to European ones. Having interviewed many people who all play an important role in shaping the public opinion about China and India, Harold Isaacs is convinced that there are in fact "all sorts of scratches on American minds about Asia," that is, all sorts of images and concepts that are more or less distorted, but all "have in common a quality of remoteness, of the exotic, the bizarre, the strange and unfamiliar, and—until the day before yesterday—a lack of connection with the more visibly important affairs of life."[35] In 1942, four months after Pearl Harbor, a national poll found that sixty percent of Americans could not locate China or India on a world map, but by the end of the war, because the

34. For a full treatment of various nineteenth-century Western concepts of China, see Mary Gertrude Mason, *Western Concepts of China and the Chinese, 1840–1876* (New York, 1939).

35. Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (New York, 1980), p. 40.

Chinese were allies who fought the Japanese, knowledge about China increased slightly among Americans. Evidently, Americans have two sets of images, of which the modulation, with one advancing and the other receding alternately, is tuned in to the social and political atmosphere of the time. China is seen as both static and restlessly chaotic; the Chinese are both wise and benighted, strong and weak, honest and devious, and so on and so forth. In popular Hollywood movies, there is on the one hand the famous villain Fu Manchu; on the other there is the clever pseudo-Confucian sleuth Charlie Chan. Of course, the actors who played Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan were not Chinese, and this fact speaks for itself. As Isaacs observes, "By examining the images we hold, say, of the Chinese and Indians, we can learn a great deal about Chinese and Indians, but mostly we learn about ourselves."[36]

It is indeed the image of the Self that appears through the mirror that we call the Other, and this is no less true of the Chinese than of the Europeans or Americans. But there is perhaps this essential difference: while the Westerners tend to see the Chinese as fundamentally Other, sometimes the Chinese would think the Westerners eager to become like the Chinese themselves, that is, if they want to become civilized at all. In chapter 52 of the *Dream of the Red Chamber,* also known as *The Story of the Stone,* the best-known novel in classical Chinese literature, we find a Western girl "from the country of Ebenash" who not only "had a perfect understanding" of Chinese literature but "could expound the *Five Classics* and write poems in Chinese."[37] In fact, the poem she composed is so good that it wins high praise from the poetically talented protagonists of that famous novel. For the Chinese of classical education, literary art was the watermark of the cultured, and here the writing of poetry would become a symbolic act of the ritual of initiation by which a foreigner was admitted into the society of culture, for which the only culture worth having was Chinese, and the Other as a cultural issue did not seem to arise.

Such an egocentric attitude may prove to be disastrous in actually dealing with the Other. When East and West first made contact, the Chinese emperor and his ministers could hardly bring themselves to understand the relation between China and other countries except in terms of an outmoded tributary framework, in which the Chinese emperor as the Son of Heaven and sovereign of the Middle Kingdom graciously accepted the respect and tribute foreign kings had to pay if they wished to contact or trade with the Celestial Dynasty. China was the sole center of civilization whereas all foreigners were regarded as barbarians. What we find in this inadequate picture of the Other is of course nothing but

36. Ibid., p. 381.

37. Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone,* trans. David Hawkes and John Minford, 5 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1973–86), 2:539, 540.

the incredible ignorance and arrogance of Chinese rulers. Such an attitude is shown clearly in Emperor Qianlong's letter to King George III in 1793. Here the Emperor told the King of England that "the virtue and prestige of the Celestial Dynasty having spread far and wide, the kings of the myriad nations come by land and sea with all sorts of precious things. Consequently there is nothing we lack, as your principal envoy and others have themselves observed. We have never set much store on strange or ingenious objects, nor do we need any more of your country's manufactures."[38] Not surprisingly, foreign policies based on such ignorance and arrogance later proved to be disastrous for China; in the painful experience of modern history, the Chinese—and Chinese intellectuals in particular—have recognized the significance of the presence of a powerful West. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that the whole history of modern China has been a long record of the clashes between cultures of the East and the West, between tradition and modernity, and that the future of China depends on a successful reconciliation of the two. To achieve that success, however, a better knowledge of the Other is absolutely vital. That explains why the desire for knowledge of the West may be said to characterize the Chinese intelligentsia during the entire modern period.

In the West, however, knowledge of China and Chinese civilization seems to be still a specialty limited to a small number of sinologists. In 1963, when Raymond Dawson edited a collection of essays on China as one of the companion volumes to the highly acclaimed *Legacy of Greece,* he felt that "a generation ago it would not have been possible to produce anything fit to occupy a place on the same shelf as the illustrious first volume of the series."[39] Even then, he still thought it necessary to entertain "a healthy scepticism" in reading anything about China. "Old misconceptions of her civilization live long and die hard," says Dawson, "for there is a certain inertia in our historical beliefs, so that they tend to be retained until they are ruthlessly questioned by original minds perhaps centuries after they have ceased to be true."[40]

Indeed, an old misconception tends to remain alive despite all improvement in knowledge and judgment, that is, the misleading idea that Chinese is a pictographic language. We have seen this idea in Bacon and Vico, and we find it again in Foucault when he talks about the difference between cultures of the East and the West in terms of different conceptions of writing. Foucault claims that in Western culture writing "refers not to a thing but to speech"; therefore, the "presence of repeated speech in

38. Quoted in *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923,* ed. Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. 19.

39. Raymond Dawson, "Introduction," *The Legacy of China,* ed. Dawson (Oxford, 1964), p. xiii.

40. Dawson, "Western Conceptions of Chinese Civilization," *The Legacy of China,* p. 4.

writing undeniably gives to what we call a work of language an ontological status unknown in those cultures where the act of writing designates the thing itself, in its proper and visible body, stubbornly inaccessible to time."[41] The reference is obviously to nonphonetic writings in Egyptian hieroglyphs or Chinese characters, which are allegedly transparent signs of things: writings that exist not in and for themselves, not ontologically. But when Foucault describes the ontological status of writing in the sixteenth century, the "absolute privilege" and "fundamental place accorded in the West to Writing," he recalls, with Blaise de Vigenère and Clâude Duret, a time when the written word was primary and the spoken word was "stripped of all its powers," when the possibility was emphasized that "before Babel, before the Flood, there had already existed a form of writing composed of the marks of nature itself" (*OT,* pp. 38, 39, 38). This naturally reminds us of Webb's view that Chinese is the primitive language before the Flood, but it reminds us even more of the sensible and accurate observation of a sixteenth-century missionary in China, Father Matthew Ricci, who noted in his diary that "from time immemorial, [the Chinese] have devoted most of their attention to the development of the written language and did not concern themselves overmuch with the spoken tongue. Even up to the present all their eloquence is to be found in their writings rather than in the spoken word."[42] If ontological status implies "privilege" and "fundamental place" as Foucault suggests, Chinese may certainly be called an ontological language in its own cultural context. As Chinese scripts are nonphonetic signs, Chinese writing is truly ontological in the sense of being detached from the spoken word. But contrary to popular misconceptions, Chinese writing is not pictographic because the characters are signs of concepts and ideas of things rather than of things themselves. When Henri Cordier, a nineteenth-century French sinologist, tried to define the Chinese writing system, he remarked with good reason that "as the graphic system is not hieroglyphic, or symbolic, or syllabic, or alphabetic, or lexigraphic, but ideophonographic, we shall, in order to avoid misconception and for the sake of brevity, call its characters *sinograms.*"[43] This coinage evidently tries to differentiate Chinese written characters from both phonetic and hieroglyphic writing; the key word used here to describe Chinese scripts is "ideophonographic." More recently, George Steiner astutely uses the word "logographic" in talking about the Chinese language.[44] However, to see Chinese characters

41. Foucault, "Language to Infinity," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), p. 56.

42. Matthew Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583–1610,* trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York, 1953), p. 28.

43. Henri Cordier, "Chinese Language and Literature," in Alexander Wylie, *Chinese Researches* (Shanghai, 1897), p. 195.

44. See George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford, 1975), p. 357.

as minipictures of a myriad of things is a perennial Western misconception that simply refuses to die. Its life is made even stronger in modern times with an injection of poetic vigor by Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, who formulated one of the most powerful modern theories of poetry based on a powerful and creative misreading of the Chinese ideograms. And based on Fenollosa and Pound, Jacques Derrida sees in the nonphonetic Chinese language "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism."[45] Again the Chinese language becomes a sign of a totally different culture, which sets off, for better or for worse, whatever is conceived as Western culture. It is about time such misconceptions were questioned and the Other was recognized as truly Other, that is, the Other in its own Otherness, which is not only non-Western but may perhaps have things in common with what the West thinks of itself—the Other that does not just serve the purpose of being a foil or contrast to the Western self.[46]

5

The question is, then, can we ever know the Other as the truly Other? When we have argued with Foucault and others who entertain a variety of distorted images of China as the Other, it seems that we have argued, ironically, not against Foucault but for him completely. All we have shown is precisely the validity of his proposition that it is hardly possible to get out of the confinement of the historical a priori, the *epistemes* or fundamental codes of cultural systems. Apparently, the misconceptions of China we find today form part of the traditional repertory of cultural concepts in the West; they are deeply rooted in its history and ideology. The image of China in the Western eye, as our discussion shows, has always been historically shaped to represent values that are considered different from Western ones. China, India, Africa, and the Islamic Orient have all served as foils to the West at one time or another, either as idealized utopias, alluring and exotic dreamlands, or lands of eternal stagnation, spiritual purblindness, and ignorance. Whatever change and progress we may make in understanding the Other, that understanding has to be mediated through language, which is itself a product of history and therefore not outside of it. As Dawson observes, the "polarity between Europe and Asia and between West and East is one of the important categories by means of which we think of the world and arrange our knowledge of it, so there can be no doubt that it colours the thoughts even of those who

45. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 90.

46. For a discussion of Derrida's use of Chinese as a model outside logocentrism, see Zhang Longxi, "The *Tao* and the *Logos:* Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (Mar. 1985): 385–98.

have a special interest in Oriental studies."[47] As there is no other language or other way of thinking available to us except our own, and no understanding of the Other except in relation to the Self, a purely "objective" or "correct" understanding unaffected by historical and ideological givens is indeed hard to find. But does that mean that our thinking and language are a kind of prisonhouse from which there is no escape? When Dawson speaks about the pervasive influence of popular misconceptions, he is speaking not only as a sinologist who understands China better than those who are yet to be initiated into the range of his knowledge, but also as a scholar and editor whose book will provide knowledge to disperse hazy fantasies and help readers understand the rich cultural legacy of China. He is, in other words, suggesting that it is not just necessary but possible to expose and rectify cultural misconceptions.

It is true to a certain extent that our thinking and knowledge are determined by the historical givens of the culture in which we are born, that we can name, speak, and think only within the boundaries of our language. Understanding begins with a set of historical givens—what Martin Heidegger describes as the fore-structure of understanding—and the process of knowing seems to move only within limits of a hermeneutic circle. Anything understood, says Heidegger, is conceptualizable through interpretation that is already "grounded in *something we have in advance*—in a *fore-having*."[48] However, the fore-structure of understanding is only a necessary but provisional beginning, not a fixation of presuppositions never to be changed and modified. "Our first, last, and constant task," says Heidegger, "is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves."[49] In Heidegger's hermeneutic theory, therefore, while presuppositions are fully recognized, the fore-structure of understanding does not preclude, but rather invites, changes and modifications based on the claims of "the things themselves." And that, as Hans-Georg Gadamer points out in a lucid gloss to this important passage, is precisely what Heidegger works out here. "The point of Heidegger's hermeneutical thinking," Gadamer observes, "is not so much to prove that there is a circle as to show that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance."[50] To know the Other certainly begins with interpretive givens, the *epistemes* or fundamental codes of a cultural system, but as the hermeneutic process evolves, those givens will be

47. Dawson, "Western Conceptions of Chinese Civilization," p. 22.

48. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), p. 191.

49. Ibid., p. 195.

50. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York, 1975), p. 236; hereafter abbreviated *TM*.

challenged and revised. As Gadamer remarks, in the Heideggerian hermeneutic process "interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones," and "methodologically conscious understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves" (*TM*, pp. 236, 239). If it is right to remember how our language largely determines the way we can talk about the Other, it would be wrong to forget that the Other has its own voice and can assert its own truth against various misconceptions. What is important then is to remain open to the claims of the Other and to listen to its voice, which will make us aware of our own preconceptions as well as the fact that Orient and Occident as polarized cultural entities are cultural constructs that are widely different from the physical entities they are supposed to represent.

Images of national characters, those popular, caricaturelike generalizations, are often generated by representational systems. In 1889, Oscar Wilde put it in clear and witty language that the discrepancy between reality and representation can be enormous. Take Japan for example, says Wilde. "The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention."[51] In proclaiming that Japan as represented in art and literature is a myth and fiction, Wilde, as Eugenio Donato argues, has dismantled the illusion of realism and revealed "what we know only too well after Derrida," namely, "the play of representation."[52] As a typical aesthete Wilde certainly prefers artistic myth to reality, but his insight into the play of representation emphasizes precisely the false nature of cultural myths. Perhaps that is why Wilde, though admittedly making deliberate overstatements, appears more soberminded than many scholars of our own time, who, for all the knowledge now made available about the language and culture of China and Japan, seem either to take myth for reality or simply refuse to acknowledge their difference.

An interesting modern reflection on Japan as "a fictive nation" and a consciously "invented name" is Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*. Like Wilde, Barthes is fully aware that the Japan that emerges in his writing is not a real country: "I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence—to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation—whose invented interplay—allows me to 'entertain' the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one

51. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," *Intentions* (New York, 1905), pp. 46–47.

52. Eugenio Donato, "Historical Imagination and the Idioms of Criticism," *Boundary 2* 8 (Fall 1979): 52.

altogether detached from our own."[53] He knows very well that the desire to use the language of the Other to reveal "the impossibilities of our own," a desire Foucault shares, is merely a "dream."[54] Having warned his reader that his writing is pure mythmaking, Barthes is able to indulge in the dream of the totally different Other and to produce a number of charming myths about Japan when he asserts, for example, that "chopsticks are the converse of our knife (and of its predatory substitute, the fork)," setting West and East again in the frame of a fundamental polarity.[55] It would be interesting to see what symbolic meaning our modern dreamers will attribute to, say, fortune cookies, which are so popular in every Chinese restaurant in the United States but unheard of in China. And what reflections they may have on the mixture of fantasy and reality, the colorful Chinatown mythologies.

Once China or Japan is recognized as truly different, that is, not as the imaginary Other with its history of imagery in the Western tradition but as a country with its own history, and once the desire to know the Other is genuine enough, being part of the desire to expand the horizon of knowledge in the West, it becomes necessary to demythologize the myth of the Other. In the traditional imagery of the Other, however, there is always an aura of mystery, exotic beauty, or what Victor Segalen calls "the aesthetic of the Diverse." As poet and sinophile, Segalen develops a theory of the Other, celebrating the far away in space or time, which he terms *l'Exotisme.* For him China is not so much a real country as a myth that inspires his *Stèles, Equipée,* and other works; demythologization of the Other would seem to him a threat to poetic charms because exoticism, according to Segalen, is nothing but "the power to *conceive the Other.*"[56] In the increasing contact of East and West, he sees a depressing loss of exoticism. "The exotic tension of the world is diminishing. Exoticism, the source of mental, asesthetic, or physical energy (though I do not like to confuse the levels), is diminishing," laments our poet. "Where is mystery? Where are the distances?"[57]

However, mystery may contribute to fear as well as to charm, and distances may blur the view of true beauty. To demythologize the Other is surely not to deny its distance, its alien nature, or the possibility of its poetic charms, but to recuperate real rather than imaginary differences. The beauty of real difference or the aesthetic of the Other cannot be truly appreciated unless various misconceptions are exposed and the false

53. Roland Barthes, "Faraway," *Empire of Signs,* trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1982), p. 3.

54. Barthes, "The Unknown Language," *Empire of Signs,* p. 6.

55. Barthes, "Chopsticks," *Empire of Signs,* p. 18.

56. Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'Exotisme: Une esthétique du divers (notes)* (Montpellier, 1978), p. 19; my translation.

57. Ibid., pp. 76, 77; my translation.

polarity between East and West is totally dismantled. To demythologize the Other is not to become self-alienated in adopting alien values, but eventually to come back to the self with rewarding experiences. Here another important concept Gadamer develops in his work may prove to be helpful, namely, the concept of Bildung.

In Hegel's concept of theoretical Bildung, there is first this move of self-alienation: "Theoretical Bildung goes beyond what man knows and experiences immediately. It consists in learning to allow what is different from oneself and to find universal viewpoints from which one can grasp the thing, 'the objective thing in its freedom', without selfish interest" (*TM*, p. 14). Yet the basic movement of the spirit is a tendency of returning to the Self from the Other; thus "it is not alienation as such, but the return to oneself, which presumes a prior alienation, that constitutes the essence of Bildung" (*TM*, p. 15). However, Bildung is not just attaining to the universal, the perfection of the absolute knowledge of philosophy, as Hegel insists. Instead Gadamer emphasizes the openness of the process: one needs "to keep oneself open to what is other, to other, more universal points of view"; for him the universal viewpoints are not absolute, "not a fixed applicable yardstick, but . . . the viewpoints of possible others" (*TM*, pp. 17–18). That is to say, to know the Other is a process of Bildung, of learning and self-cultivation, which is neither projecting the Self onto the Other nor erasing the Self with what belongs to the Other. It is rather a moment when Self and Other meet and join together, in which both are changed and enriched in what Gadamer calls "the fusion of horizons" (*TM*, p. 273). That moment of fusion would eliminate the isolated horizon of either the Self or the Other, the East or the West, and bring their positive dynamic relationship into prominence. For in the fusion of horizons we are able to transcend the boundaries of language and culture so that there is no longer the isolation of East or West, no longer the exotic, mystifying, inexplicable Other, but something to be learned and assimilated until it becomes part of our knowledge and experience of the world. Thus, in demythologizing China as the myth of the Other, the myth disappears but not the beauty, for the real differences between China and the West will be clearly recognized. China's true Otherness will be appreciated as contributing to the variety of our world and the totality of what we may proudly call the heritage of human culture.